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Dear Spiritual Children and Friends of Padre Pio,

The Risen Christ bless you with His peace!

The season of Easter is saturated with Peace. It is a time for us to enter the Joy of the Risen Jesus and realize that our God is alive and well. We see in the few chapters that end the Gospel accounts a transforming experience for all the first followers of the Lord. It was an inner transformation, for as yet they were fearful of the Jews, but joy-filled at the sight of the Savior. No doubt some may have thought that 'now He will re-establish Israel', 'now He will manifest Himself to the world and conquer our dominators', 'now the sinners and sinful nations will be put down and Israel will reign as the righteous nation'. As childish as this manner of thinking may seem, I do not doubt that some, if not all the disciples, may have had similar thoughts or feelings. All we need do is remember what the concern was on the road to Jerusalem as Jesus spoke of His pending capture-torture-death...and resurrection; the apostles were talking about who would be first and powerful in the kingdom, and who would reign on the right and left with Jesus.

The disciples saw Jesus captured and tortured; they knew He died and was sealed in a guarded tomb. Things were not as the disciples expected. Things were not as the first followers had hoped. Things seemed to be moving in a direction totally different than expected and desired. The disciples stayed together in the upper room with Mary the mother of Jesus. They were afraid and confused, but found inner strength through their common bond in Jesus' name and all He taught them. They were at peace within themselves, while still frightened of the world around them. Calm demeanor, conscious awareness, and cautious outlook, were now the elements that helped them slowly regain a hope they had lost on Calvary. They began to bond as the 'Apostolic Community' that would fearlessly proclaim the Messiahship and Divinity of Jesus the Christ to the world.

Calvary was a tragic day for the first followers of Jesus. The hopes and dreams of the disciples hung with Jesus on the cross. Until He gave up His last breath, Jesus could have made everything happen as they had hoped. When He said, 'It is finished', 'Father into Your hands I commend My spirit', the Master seemed to go the way of all other Messianic pretenders who, as good, patriotic, and even faithful Jews as they could have been, still ended their hopeful enterprise of re-establishing the independent nation of Israel with their own deaths. Could

Jesus be any different!? In this case, the answer was 'Yes'! These followers could not let go, could not forget. They were a hodgepodge crew, yet the diversity and diametrically opposed personalities among them, seemed to find a consolation and strength now with each other. There was a 'troubled peace': 'troubled' because of human uncertainty regarding the future...'peace' because the spirit of the three years of His life they had shared with Jesus and His teachings made them believe that the dream of a 'new heaven and a new earth' was attainable...and for some reason, they knew they were the messengers who had to become the message...Jesus' acceptance of Calvary told them it was 'the hard way' they had to follow to give a more effective witness.

At Mass, just before we receive the Body and Blood of our Savior in Holy Communion, the priest celebrant prays in 'Persona Christi' for all the community as well as for himself; he too needs the graces and blessings as a member of the Mystical Body of Christ. The priest prays: Lord Jesus Christ, You said to Your apostles, I leave you peace. My peace I give you. Look not on our sins but on the faith of Your Church (people)... Again we hear the Lord in the Liturgy, after His death and resurrection sacramentally re-presented, gifting us with His peace. This peace can only be felt if it is given away, if we become peacemakers with others because we are at peace with God and ourselves. We can be at peace and be peacemakers only if and when we disarm our hearts to one another. If the sign of peace we extend at Mass is not sincere or is even refused, the reception of the Eucharist (the Real Presence of the Living Lord) will have little or no effect in the one receiving Him. We are integral members of the Mystical Body of Christ. No member of the body acts on its own without affecting the whole body. No member can refuse to support, encourage, forgive the whole body without affecting his/her own spiritual health. (cfr. 1 Corinthians 12: 12-26)

Life is given to us in order to acquire the eternal, and due to a lack of reflection, we base our affections on that which pertains to this world through which we are passing, so that when we have to leave we are frightened and agitated. Believe me, in order to live happily while on pilgrimage we must keep before our eyes the hope of arriving at our Homeland where we will stay for eternity...It is God who calls us to Himself. He watches how we make our way to Him, and will never permit anything to happen on the way that is not for our greater good. He knows what we are, and He will extend his paternal hand to us while we are going through rough stretches...But in order to receive this grace, we must have total confidence in Him. (Letter to Erminia Gargani - 23 April 1918)

Padre Pio reminds us in his letter to Erminia Gargani that for this inner peace and external serenity we must have a recollected spirit. Reflection helps us hear more clearly the God who speaks. We see more plainly who we are in the light of God's truth, and thus we are able to 'disarm' our hearts towards one another. Reflection will help us to place more confidence in God and His Word, and let go of our preconceptions that often close ourselves to others.

You know, Father, that I attach no importance at all to this extraordinary state of mine. For this reason I never stop asking Jesus to lead me by the ordinary path followed by everyone else, for I am well aware that the path by which divine mercy is leading me is not suitable for my soul as

it is to very material food. What I say to the Lord is that I am seeking the amendment of my life, my spiritual resurrection, true and substantial love, the sincere conversion of my whole self to him...I want to love Jesus as I should. (Letter to Padre Benedetto - 7 April 1915)

As we can see in the words addressed to Padre Benedetto, Padre Pio takes nothing for granted. In fact, he sees himself in need of greater conversion because of the gifts with which God has blessed him. Our God is a 'hidden God' ... hidden in the hearts of everyone, for some as a Real Presence, and for others as a nostalgic memory. St. Augustine expresses the longing of the human heart when he writes: O Lord, we are made for You, and our hearts can find no rest until they rest in You. Repeating this expression, the Church also prays: O God, You have placed in our hearts such a deep yearning for You, that only those who find You can find peace! It is this hidden God that the yearning of all human beings for 'Someone' seeks out. This is the God we are called to encounter in our individual lives and preach and teach to others. This is the God with Whom we seek a deeper relationship during the Lenten Season. This is the God of Life in Whose Spirit we have come to recognize Jesus as the Christ, incarnate Son of God, in Whose Death and Resurrection heaven is once more made accessible to us.

People of science tell us how difficult it is today to speak about God when the immensity of the galaxies and the materialism of an entrenched secularism in today's world question anything that cannot be tangibly experienced. Even those involved in pastoral ministry realize the difficulty there is to speak about God today. Talking about God has become always more problematic, both because of the new 'verbage' required, as well as the difficulties created by a world that has 'to see to believe' and anything other than what can be 'touched' with the senses is just a 'figment of the imagination', 'a relic of times past', 'pious people's inability to move with the times', and the like. Our society wants instant gratification and concrete answers. No sign will be given it but the sign of Jonah. Just as Jonah was in the belly of the whale for three days and three nights so shall the Son of man be... It is precisely this 'sign' we Christians throughout the world remember, celebrate, and believe during the Easter Season, and every time we enter the Mystery of the Eucharist. This 'sign' we attempt to become more and more in life. As Spiritual Children of Padre Pio are we making every effort to be this 'sign'? Can people hear in our words and see in our actions that Jesus' Resurrection has filled us with confidence as it did the early disciples to fearlessly confront our world in the power of God's Word? Has the experience of Calvary helped us see the cross as a crowning moment in life rather than a collapse of our hopes and dreams? We are spiritual children of Padre Pio; the cross was the unique gift he 'wore' visibly for fifty years. Do we wear ours with dignity and joy, and carry it with confident hope in its fruits?

God's presence envelops us, even those who as yet have not met or even know Him. When we build on the positives of life, the beauty of creation, the diversity-power-wonder of nature at all its levels, the complexity of the human person and our ability to reach horizons that other creatures cannot, we encounter a God of Love and Life. All too often we seek God in the drastic, disastrous, difficult, dilemmas of life; global fears, economic instability, incurable diseases, natural disasters all 'make us think' of God. At those moments we perhaps see a distorted image of the One Great God of the Covenant who entered an agreement with

Humanity and seeks to fulfil it each day. The Death and Resurrection of His only begotten Son, Jesus, speaks to us of this God of Life.

When we accept our moment in life and believe in the Lord's Resurrection, ignorance gives way to knowledge, fear to courage and strength, prejudice to impartiality and tolerance, pride to humility, indifference to concern, over-indulgence to self-control, hypocrisy to sincerity, discouragement to hope, doubt to faith, and hatred to love, because ... Dawn always follows the night ... The sun breaks through the darkness, the clouds ... The Sun will always shower his light upon us, because the Resurrection of Jesus is the New Dawn bringing the Light of Christ to all willing to accept Him.

May the light of Christ's Resurrection shine in your life that we might have life, and have it in abundance. May the Risen Lord Jesus shower you and your loved ones with peace, joy and abundant blessings for a Happy Easter; may Mary, Mother of the Redeemer and our Mother, help you to live with Jesus in the light of the New Life His Resurrection offers each one of us; and may Padre Pio watch over each one of you, his Spiritual Children, with loving care. With a promise to keep all of you affectionately in my Easter Masses and Liturgies, I wish you and your dear ones a very Happy and Joyous Easter.

Peace and Blessings

Fr. Francis A. Sariago, O.F.M. Cap.

National Coordinator